

Turtles most mocked

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Alice wondered

It's sad to know (which means it's worthwhile to understand it, despite the pain) how the **turtle** is the most mocked of beings. He is mocked for what he does and what he does not, for what he is and what he is not.

The poor amphibian is used by hubristic beings (like us) to promote whatever cause we want to champion. Often, we don't really know what we are doing, with the vague notion that mocking the turtle will convey our wisdom.

The first such Turtle that comes to mind is, of course, the **Mock Turtle**. This is his origin story as told by Lewis Carroll in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland:

Then the Queen left off, quite out of breath, and said to Alice,
"Have you seen the Mock Turtle yet?"
"No," said Alice. "I don't even know what a Mock Turtle is."
"It's the thing Mock Turtle Soup is made from", said the Queen.
— Alice in Wonderland, chapter 9

Soup-based

The name Mock Turtle itself comes from a dish that was popular in the Victorian period, the mock turtle soup. Its ingredients often include brains and organ meats, such as calf's head or a calf's foot to duplicate the texture and flavour of actual turtle meat.

Lewis Carroll (whose original name was Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) was a brilliant mathematician and logician. He also had a genius for imaginative story-telling, and relished puns and wordplays. In Queen Victoria's Britain, Church and class mattered most, and there was an Empire to run (and Malaysia and Singapore to govern). Hence, there was little space for pressure release (other than colonizing other countries). Creative writing was one of the avenues for emotional release.

The teacher Tortoise

Carroll loved punning on Victorian fashions and etiquette, and frequently revelled in it. John Tenniel's lively description and drawing give humorous value to the Mock Turtle, as he is clearly an assemblage of creatures, therefore not a real turtle as his name rightly suggests. In Carroll's story, Alice meets the Mock Turtle with the Gryphon (a sort of friendly Victorian dragon). The Mock Turtle is a very melancholic character (often in tears), because he thinks he used to be a real turtle. He tells Alice his history of going to "school" in the sea, but cannot understand the human school system that Alice describes to him.

There is a pun on the two senses of "school," referring in the turtle's usage to a school of fish or marine animals, and by Alice to an institute of learning. He says his teacher was an

old Sea Turtle called Tortoise. When Alice asks him why he was called Tortoise if he was a Turtle, the Mock Turtle answers, “We called him tortoise because he taught us!” (In Carroll’s dialect, “tortoise” and “taught us” both are pronounced [tɔ:tʊs].)

Mock Dragon

Now, the Mock Turtle’s name is more than a mere pun on the name of the soup. The Tenniel illustration of the Mock Turtle is not random: it is clearly a patchwork of creatures that make up the ingredients of mock turtle soup. The pun is not only on the name, but on the nature of the soup itself! It shows the Mock Turtle with the body of a turtle, and the head, hooves and tail of a calf! The pun is a complicated one, both a play on words and looks.

Incidentally, the Chinese dragon was a “**Mock Dragon**.” It had a horse’s head, a dragon’s torso, a snake’s tail; with stag’s antlers, a camel’s skull, a demon’s eyes, a snake’s neck, a clam’s belly, a carp’s scales, an eagle’s talons, a tiger’s sole, a cow’s ears, and a “chimu” (尺木), a bump (like the Greek Buddha’s *uṣṇiṣa*, Pali *uṇhīsa*). The Chinese revered such a hybrid as the hypostasis of all powers in the Chinese universe. It would be interesting to listen to them in dialogue, with a Star Trek universal translator, or in Lewis Carroll’s pen.

Post Turtle

There’s another kind of Turtle who is often mocked, but the post-Victorian: he is, of course, the **Post Turtle**. It all began, we are told, with this old rancher who is talking about politics with a young city man. The rancher compares a politician to a “post turtle.” The young man doesn’t understand and asks him what he meant.

The old man says, “When you’re driving down a country road and you see a fence post with a turtle stuck on top, that’s a **Post Turtle**. You know he didn’t get up there by himself. He doesn’t belong there. You wonder who put him there. He can’t get anything done while he’s up there. You just want to help the poor, dumb thing down.”

Used god idea

American writer Mary Doria Russel referred to the post turtle in her 1996 novel *The Sparrow* (1996). She attributes it to Father D W Yarborough, leader of the first Earth expedition to another planet. Yarborough refers to post turtles in the context of seeming anomalies in nature and regards them as proof of the existence of God, specifically of God trying to get our attention.

This becomes wryly humorous or sweetly contemptuous when we combine the old rancher quip and Russel’s yarn about God. “You know he didn’t get up there by himself. He doesn’t belong there. You wonder who put him there. He can’t get anything done while he’s up there. You just want to help the poor, dumb thing down.”

We would, of course, never use such a tack to prove the Buddha’s existence or credibility. We only need to look around us, and we would experience what he is teaching.

Politics and class

In the US, a number of Presidents (for various reasons) have been depicted as post turtles: Bill Clinton; George W Bush, Barack Obama and, of course, a current favourite, the unmentionable one.

The traditional Chinese, on the other hand, have a way of preventing personal embarrassment or deflecting it: a well-schooled classy gentleman might declare himself to be totally ignorant, self-effacing, when asked about his schooling (the way Singaporeans ask you how many rooms your home has).

Then, after you have spilled your awful bellyful of beans and bombast, like saying you are the top of your class in a local university, he then flatly announces, he's from UC Berkeley! (Thankfully, this story never really happened, but it's worth telling here.)

Buddhist Turtles

It would be unfair to leave out the Buddhist post turtle—since this is such an educating imagery. Just as Māra is defeated by simply declaring “I know it's you, Māra!”—like children's “You're it!” We become that proverbial turtle when we shop around for Buddhist knows and hows: from this teacher and that, all manner of meditations, etc. The idea is to impress others (we, of course, don't even know this but it's still karma): a seemingly perpetual pitaka of odd parts. That's a Mock Turtle.

When we think we know a lot of Suttas or Dhamma, and show it off (yes, you can use me as an example), or better, we know Abhidhamma or some Mantras, then, we qualify as a post turtle. We are stuck on that high pole out of reach of other turtles. We are easily seen by others: “You know he didn't get up there by himself. He doesn't belong there. You wonder how he got up there. He can't get anything done while he's up there. You just want to help the poor, dumb thing down.”

R663 Revisioning Buddhism 260

[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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